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### GHOSTS IN THE WOOD PILE

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GHOSTS IN THE WOOD PILE

by

Susannah Rand

A THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts

Major: English

Under the Supervision of Professor Jennine Capó Crucet

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# GHOSTS IN THE WOOD PILE

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University of Nebraska, 2021

Advisor: Jennine Capó Crucet

GHOSTS IN THE WOOD PILE is a creative thesis comprised of an artist statement, statement of creative influences, and five short stories. The artist statement serves to depict my goals in writing this collection—namely, to provide investigatory, critical, and joyful fantasies for a young queer audience—and addresses what work still needs to be done to complete this collection. The collection itself explores dystopian and fantastical alternate realities in which characters struggle with desire, selfhood, and societal expectation.

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## INTRODUCTION

### I. ARTIST STATEMENT

This thesis includes five short stories meant to feature in a longer collection about desire and selfhood. My characters crash into normative expectations and choose, most of the time, what they *want* rather than what is anticipated. I write queer women and nonbinary folk (though this selection features only Herman) who are young and growing and challenging the world around them. I see these works as a set of coming-of-age stories for a queer audience who want to imagine futures for themselves; to see themselves in characters who are simultaneously powerful and flawed.

Perhaps queerness, though, is not the thing that most noticeable in my work; after all, I have written five stories that are set in a sometimes slightly, sometimes overtly, altered reality. It's true that when I sit down to write I feel compelled to write something at least a *little* fantastical. It's part of me, that need for magic. In 2019, I read Jennine Capó Crucet's "Magic Kingdoms" in *My Time Among the Whites*, which upended and complicated my understanding of my tendency toward fantasy. In "Magic Kingdoms," Capó Crucet writes on the danger of fantasy when it operates to erase and control our desires:

I'd been so happy at Disney World and I would never be that happy again. Disney had nurtured my impulse for fantasy—an instinct vital for survival but dangerous and ultimately damaging if misdirected. Our fantasies are not fantasies if they are given *to* us rather than imagined *by* us. (58)

I'd be lying to suggest that I don't appreciate Disney magic (its promises, after all, are addicting and soothing); I would be lying, also, to suggest that, in the moment of reading "Magic Kingdoms," I didn't become intensely concerned with the operation of fantasy in

my writing. For me, fantasy has always served as a dual purpose, a painful kind of balancing between escapism and creative hopefulness. I have often suggested that I can't write a 'normal' story—that to me as a writer, a story without something strange is not a story worth writing. After "Magic Kingdoms," I investigated that desire: why am I writing these unusual worlds? How are they operating on the reader? Am I creating to control, reinforcing normative structures of oppression, or to empower?

Perhaps even more complicated: what does a story hoping to empower its readers look like?

I've come to view fantasy in my own work as a multi-use tool: sometimes to upend the norm, sometimes to bring it under close scrutiny. In "Little Lila," you'll find a world wherein the technology of beauty has expanded what's currently possible into a dystopic near-future—as a writer, this positioning allowed me to critique the frightening reality of beauty and technology of the now. In "Superposition," a near-normal world is made strange by its characters' preoccupation with turning invisible, which opens the opportunity to directly consider the gaze, objectification, and gender as restricting. Although I believe my works engage with fantasy to varying degrees of success, I believe that my constant queer imagining of new, different worlds—sometimes better, sometimes worse—ultimately has a singular purpose: to reveal and question what exists, what does not, and most of all, why.

Capó Cruet quotes Judith Butler in "Magic Kingdoms": fantasies are dangerous but necessary because of "the articulation of the possible," the ability of fantasy to provide a space in which marginalized people can engage in imagining their own world of belonging. This form of fantasy is its own kind of resistance; resisting erasure, resisting death, in exchange for an imagined queer utopia (may we move ever closer to it).

I write about the impossible to suggest what's possible. I write stories in which queer characters narrate and choose their own destinies and desires, undisturbed by normative restrictions. As a queer person myself, I write my own fantasies.

Of the five stories in this collection, most could be considered fantasies of rage and revenge. I thought I'd come to UNL to write stories about trauma, and instead I wrote as a kind of processing *of* trauma, instead. I am invested in writing queer, women, and nonbinary characters who are *angry*, who want different things than what the world permits—characters who demand what they want, take them by force. I realize, however, that this tendency toward violence and rage is only part of the story that I'd like to tell in this collection.

It's only toward the end of my time at this program that my stories have begun trending toward optimism with pieces like "The Calling" or "Superposition." These stories feature at the beginning of my collection partially because of my fondness for them: they are the kind of stories I want to go on to write, where endings are a little happier, a little more curious of the possible. I have come to understand, given the support and encouragement from this program, that I shouldn't avoid my desire to write good things that bring joy. I am a little sad, now, to present to you a collection that is half-filled. As I continue expanding this work, I hope to write more stories that are soft in heart, that appreciate and coax sentimentality rather than furiously seek to escape it. (This is, perhaps, my own personal goal in rebellion: to write *toward* the gently sentimental, the sappily emotional, the feminine and queer, rather than participate in the toxicity that would ask me to reject it for the sake of the masculine/literary. It is a balance, after all, says Herman in "Superposition.")

I can't answer my own question, necessarily; I'm not sure what a story that empowers its readership looks like. I am not sure that I've written those. I know that that is what I constantly hope to write toward—that my work lets someone know that belonging is out there.

## II. CREATIVE INFLUENCES

The creative influences on my work can be broken into two major categories: theoretical and fictional. Strangely, I often find my work more influenced by theoretical works rather than fictional; I think this tends to be because I work starting from concepts into plots and characters. Theory, especially queer theory and anti-racist theory, provides me with the knowledge-groundwork for writing in that it directly influences how I choose to approach, interpret, and revise my own work.

In the case of this thesis, the most influential works of theory were Judith Butler's book *The Force of Nonviolence* and her article "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," as well as Jane Bennett's "Vibrant Matter," Stacey Waite's "The Cultivation of Writerly Habits is a National Emergency," Asao B. Inoue's "Classroom Writing Assessment as an Antiracist Practice: Confronting White Supremacy in the Judgments of Language," and, of course, Jennine Capó Crucet's "Magic Kingdoms." These works of theory changed the way in which my mind processes, changed my perception of the world on a near-molecular level, which deeply affects my writing. For me, theory affects craft, transforming my work into a site of potential rebellion wherein I can mobilize my work toward justice. For example, Butler's "Imitation and Gender Subordination" put words to a sensation of compulsory



performance that had haunted me for years; in “Superposition,” I write a character who struggles similarly with gender and performance, who feels constantly called upon to “become” or reinforce a binary gender system.

In the case of some of these other texts whose influence is far less literal, I can only suggest the collaborative nature of writing: what I read, I fold into my work. As Butler writes in *The Force of Nonviolence*, interdependence is inescapable: our bodies and minds are built of and with one another. (And, to take it one step further: the things we create carry their own potent *thingliness* that carries their own vibrancy, imbued with the life of the creator; when I read, I take on some of the properties of that works’ author.) In recent months, antiracist pedagogy has become a major interest and investment of mine; although I am still very new to the subject, I seek to teach against the standardization of English and writing and encourage my students to investigate the way institutions uphold and consistently reinvent whiteness and power. I know this is not necessarily a direct influence on my writing—but again, I can’t separate them. When I teach, I am still writing; when I’m writing, I’m hoping to, on some level, teach. I tend to believe the teaching of writing and the act of writing to be intimately intertwined.

I find that, perhaps most importantly for my writing, theory grants me a critical eye. How is my work engaging in the world? What is it offering to the queer audiences I hope to reach? How can I write characters who resist? In the process of revision for these five stories, I often found myself moving further and further away from initial instincts that were grounded in normativity. The final story in this collection, “Appetite,” has moved the farthest from its initial writing. It began as a story entitled “Romance” that was much more about a toxic but superficial heterosexual relationship; it is now a story about a woman,

Sam, and her desire to narratize and romanticize her own life to the point of permanent dissatisfaction.

As for the fictional influences on my work, there are a few that are obvious—writers like Kelly Link and Karen Russell, who both likewise write strangeness into the everyday. However, I have found over the course of this program that ‘strangeness’ does not need to always be as loud and upfront as I sometimes prefer to write it. In the past two years, some of the ‘strangest’ work—as in, the work that upended my expectations the most or struck me as extraordinary—was not magical at all, but a carefully rendered depiction of the consciousness of a character. Authors like Bernardine Evaristo in *Girl, Woman, Other* or Jhumpa Lahiri in *Interpreter of Maladies*, and even Kazuo Ishiguro in *The Remains of the Day*, write in hyper-realist styles (which I long convinced myself I would *never* write), but these works feature the minutia of lived experience in such fully realized depictions it *feels* strange to inhabit the internal workings of their characters’ minds.

I often find that I struggle the most with this kind of writing—the kind that is deeply internal and intimate, that shows the ‘strangeness’ of separateness, the way in which our minds differ operationally from one another (but then remind us that we are actually not so different, after all). This is, again, evidenced, I believe, in the difference in narrative distance between the first two stories, “The Calling” and “Superposition,” in this collection versus the last three. Through these fictional influences, I have learned about intimacy and emotionality in writing. As I mentioned above, it is this careful sentimentality that I hope to develop and nurture in my own work moving forward.

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## THE CALLING

Mel's guts knotted up as tight as the coil of hair she'd twisted around her finger. In front of her, Frankie keyed into the back entrance of the Omaha Children's Museum, her key-hand visibly shivering in the winter-night cold. Mel kept her eyes on the move—at the thick metal door, at the closed dumpster to their left, at the crumbling wall behind them that hid who-knows-who on the other side. She even checked up, like some horror would fall from the snowy sky and force her into action.

The whole world was a big threat, tempting her. Who are you going to be, Mel?

"Hurry up," Mel said, giving Frankie a gentle kick in the calf with the toe of her boot.

"This is the perfect opportunity for me to have to save you."

"The door's sticking," Frankie said, shoving it hard with her coat-puffed shoulder. "I think it's the ice."

Mel joined in the push, the cold door stinging her bare hands. It popped free, a soft tinkling accompanying the metal scraping the frame.

Frankie's black hair was coated in a layer of tiny white snow crystals. She waved an arm for Mel to enter, very princely. Mel curtsied.

"Voila. One break-in achieved."

It was-but-wasn't an actual break in, considering Frankie had just snatched her mom's keys from where they hung on the hook near the front door. Frankie had assured Mel that they probably wouldn't go to prison because it'd be Frankie's own mother, the director of the museum, that'd have to press charges.

But it was still *bad*. And Mel so desperately wanted to prove that she could be bad.

They slipped inside. Blood flooded Mel's ears, making everything sound loud and clear. She felt giddy. She pretended that this must be what it felt like to be drunk, and she spun in a slow circle in the middle of the dark employee break room, not wanting to miss a second of the effect.

Frankie shut the door and flipped on the lights. Mel saw the tan couch, the vending machine: icons in Frankie's memories. A week ago, they'd been curled on Frankie's bed, Mel's toes warm and happy inside a pair of Frankie's fuzzy pink socks. She rubbed them against Frankie's heels, friction, as Frankie discussed the misadventures she'd had while her mom was at work: stealing candy from the vending machine by stretching her arms up through the flap, pilfering through the wallets of the left-behind coats of employees.

"How much money did you take?" Mel had asked, drawing two fingers along Frankie's arm, connecting the moles on her skin.

Frankie'd just washed her face, and her cheeks were bright pink. She was on her back, hands crossed carefully across her hips. Under her eyes were purple hooks smudgy with leftover mascara. "It wasn't much. One had a ten. Another had a Build-A-Bear gift card. I kept them."

Mel had made Frankie dig them out of her desk as proof. She cupped them in her hands and Mel inspected them one by one. The bill was old, torn on a corner. The gift card was decorated with colorful balloons, and the back read, in blue pen, *Happy Birthday Sarah!*

Mel had wanted to kiss her then. Drawn close like a moon-and-planet combo. Inspired by everything that Frankie was, the sleepy arrogance of her. Instead, Frankie'd gotten distracted, showing her some of the other things she'd taken, mostly from Walmart. A cheap set of rings. A watch, the kind stuck into a plastic casing.

“I’m not a klepto, or anything,” Frankie said as Mel held her hoard, the two of them crows. “I just like trying everything once.”

In the break room, Frankie entered the code for the alarm. Mel hadn’t even heard the beeping.

“There’s not much in here,” Frankie said, and then pointed to a blue door. “The museum’s that way.”

Mel hadn’t really thought about going beyond here, the spot where, in Mel’s imagination, Frankie’d become the center of everything. She’d hoped they’d end up on the break room couch, horizontal, the situation too precarious for sleep but just right for admissions of feelings. And for a moment, the couch hung between them. Mel even thought she saw Frankie’s eyes slide over from Mel to the cushions, just the cusp of an invitation. Their flirting was obvious to all of Mel’s friends at school, who were downright sick of rolling their eyes when Mel would half-heartedly whine about how she just wasn’t sure Frankie was interested.

“Are you kidding?” That was Tom, finally giving up placating. “She picks you up to take you to school every morning.”

It was a bit of a big deal. Mel’s house was hiding behind a ten foot gate, and usually there was at least *one* photographer hanging around. They’d gotten bored taking photos of Mel after she’d disappointed them time and time again—she wasn’t her mother, after all—but most people were still too scared to even come to Mel’s house. Frankie didn’t even care. When someone’d tried to take a photo of her, she’d just grinned with a thumbs up.

Mel did know Frankie was interested. She wasn’t dumb. But Mel felt that Frankie must feel how she did: that it was more fun to twist around it.

Before either of them could suggest they should stay, Mel said, “You’re right,” and headed for the door.

The break room was safe: the known world. Mel needed more. Still, when they walked into the main section of the museum, Mel’s heart fluttered painfully. She chewed on the inside of her cheek and let Frankie lead her by hand. The ghostly grey light of the large front windows outlined walls and corners.

Mel had been here before. Back then as a child, the museum had seemed gigantic, like she’d never uncover all of it. But now Mel could read the layout: main room, banquet hall, special exhibition. The signs were painted in yellow, bright and aggressive. Everything was smaller, only reaching to her hip. The sparkly, magical feeling of drunkenness drained away.

“There used to be a saloon,” Mel said.

Now the main room of the museum displayed a child-sized Hyvee grocery store that only came up to her chest, complete with registers and a bakery. Mel slipped out of Frankie’s hand, afraid Frankie would feel the sinkhole of disappointment sucking away her intestines.

“Not since I’ve been here.” Frankie had moved here five years ago, age ten, from Des Moines. “I used to play in the art room when I wasn’t in the back.” She pointed, encouraging them there. Mel wasn’t ready to move on.

“It was a whole little western town.”

She’d been six, seven, playing in the general store, sticking plastic corn up her sweater while an annoying kid kept trying to convince everyone there was a tornado on the way. It had seemed absurd: they were indoors, it was impossible, and it wasn’t a fun game. Too close to real life, like the summer before when a tornado had wiped out the tree in their backyard, sent it sprawling across the neighbor’s fence.

Mel had ignored the doomsday prophecies. She'd wanted to show her mother the shiny corn cobs, to sit together and pretend to eat them, chomping along the rows, pretending to get strings stuck in their teeth.

And then, a half-minute later, she'd witnessed her mother save someone.